



David White

We live in a crowded island, cramped in leisure terms by the limitations of space made available for development of golf courses in urban areas, and by a deep seated misunderstanding in the eyes of very many local authorities that golf is a rich man's pastime.

A classic example came to light recently when Watford Borough Council, a left wing controlled body in a heavily populated area, reluctantly conceding the need to give golf to the ratepaying populace at large chose a cheapskate way out, that of attempting to claw back into public ownership a private golf course and club that had operated successfully and profitably for approaching one hundred years.

Their failure is seen, certainly in my eyes, as a victory over bureaucratic bungling, but it does pose the problem of just where todays overspill players and future generations of young tyros are going to find suitable sites for their teeth cutting.

The plea of limitations on finances, ground space or population often prevents development of a full 18 hole layout, and where this occurs authorities look to nine holes as the only alternative. This has not always been the case and records of olden days demonstrate just how varied golf courses were in their hole numbers.

Odd Numbers

The old links at Musselburgh, where I recently witnessed the grasping vandalism perpetrated by the racecourse authorities and where play is now limited to a mockery of former times, were originally played over just five holes, later extended to eight; until 1870 Wimbledon had only seven, until Tom Dunn extended it to 19! (one for luck?) Gullane began with 13, adding two later. The very first Open

Championship, won by the innovative Willie Park at Prestwick in 1860, was played over a 36 hole total of three times twelve holes. North Berwick were content with seven while Montrose for some inexplicable reason had 25! Bruntsfield, where a shortened variety of the game is still played, began with only six. Blackheath, as influential in setting standards then as the R. & A. is now, played their earliest matches over three times seven.

Of equal importance historically is the length of holes. Our forefathers had no need for monsters, for the old feather ball, and later the guttie, didn't travel nearly as far as it's modern counterpart. Perhaps there is a case now for further restricting the length attainment of the modern ball, or in certain circumstances imposing the use of the innovative Cayman ball, which travels approximately half the distance of it's big brother. I've played the Cayman and can vouch for its entertainment value.

Accidental Eighteen

With the move of authority from Prestwick to St. Andrews came an acceptance of their own particular and peculiar course layout of eighteen holes, albeit played over nine double greens, home and back. The seal was set and eighteen became a standard from which we may not deviate.

Clever course designers now ensure that ninth and eighteenth greens return to the clubhouse and though few, if any, give credence to double greens (which I feel add spice to the game, placing putting at a high premium and, surely, making maintenance easier?) the loop permits the shorter game of nine holes to be played with ease.

The space/cost factor however, even for nine holes, is one that will not go away. With present day construction costs alone running at between £25,000 and £38,000 per hole there is much in favour of looking at smaller sites, disused gravel pits, reclaimed land, school, university or hotel outfields and unused and neglected industrial land, where authorities or



smaller communities who feel they are unable to afford or maintain a full length course would be more readily able to construct and maintain a useful and competitive six hole course.

The schools could include golf in their curriculum, recruiting assistant professionals as group coaches, and industrial giants could have facilities at hand for their personnel — a therapeutic release valve for the pent-up frustrations of the day. As for the aged, a six hole course may well provide all they want, leaving the full length courses to those more able to stand the weariness which 6000+ yards often brings.

Six(th) Sense

Golf over six holes, even six short holes, need not be dull, indeed with sensible use of multiple tees, large enough to withstand the extra usage, a layout could be devised with variable hole lengths that would bring in every possible combination of the game. Nor should we lose sight that perfection in the short game, the skill of holing six-foot putts and placing chip shots to within one-putt distance every time, would make remarkable players of us all. Banging the ball a mile with wood is not the way to perfection.

Let us examine the benefits. First the land needed, often unsuited to any other sporting application, will be about 25% less than for a nine holer. The course construction costs will be substantially lower and maintenance could, in most cases, be handled easily by one or two greenkeepers. No longer would it be necessary to write off the better part of a day for a round and its trimmings. Six holes may easily be slotted in, say ninety minutes at most. Above all six hole courses would serve as a relief canal from overcrowded courses whilst providing those without access to such full facilities to experience the joys of this most glorious game — that surely would be no bad thing?

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